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ABSTRACT

To determine the impact of Composition Aides (CA's)--aides hired to assist teachers in giving students increased writing practice--on student opportunity to write in the District of Columbia Schools, a study investigated the characteristics of CA's, their usefulness, and the amount of time they spent performing various activities. During May and June of 1987, surveys were administered to 32 CA's, all teachers supervising CA's, and a sample of English teachers without CA's. Overall response rates were 50% for CA's, 59% for supervisors of CA's, and 80% for teachers without CA's. After the first six months of operation, findings indicated that when CA's are present in the schools, students complete more writing assignments during an average week than do students in classes without CA's, and more activities including direct writing are emphasized in the classroom. Eight tables of data are included. (MM)

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THE IMPACT OF COMPOSITION AIDES ON WRITING IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

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July 30, 1987

District of Columbia Public Schools

THE IMPACT OF COMPOSITION AIDES ON WRITING IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COMPOSITION AIDE'S SURVEY, SUPERVISING TEACHER'S SURVEY and SURVEY OF ENGLISH TEACHERS, developed by Research and Evaluation, were administered to respective teachers in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) to determine the impact of Composition Aides (CA's) on student opportunity to write. In addition, the characteristics of CA's, their usefulness and the amount of time they spend performing various activities were investigated. The surveys were administered during May-June, 1987. After a follow-up mailing, 50% of the identified CA's responded to the survey, 59% of the supervising teachers and 80% of English teachers without CA's.

The FINDINGS indicate that:

1. Thirty-six Composition Aides (CA's) were hired from the 48 applicants that met the criteria for selection. Of the 16 responding CA's (50% of the CA pool), eight (8) were hired between December 1986 and February 1987, five (5) were hired during the period March-April 1987. Their average salary was $7,000 per year.

2. Of the 16 responding CA candidates, four (25%) had earned a bachelor's or higher degree, nine (56%) had attended one to three years of college beyond high school and two (13%) had earned a high school diploma/GED.

3. Training for CA's included five inservice training activities organized by the DCPS English Department. The five workshops were Diagnostic and Skill Building, Collaboration with Classroom Teachers (included supervising teachers), Conferencing Skills, Holistic and Analytic Scoring and Individual/Group Evaluation. Problems arose in that 31% of the responding CA's were not on staff when the first inservice training sessions were offered, and poor communication existed among some principal's, supervising teachers and CA's relative to the role of CA's and the inservice training schedule. Supervising teachers expressed concern about the limited experience of CA's in writing. Many supervisors indicated that CA's should be exposed to a long-term program of inservice in writing.

4. The work of most CA's, in rank order, involved correcting and grading papers, assisting in the preparation of lessons/projects and working with students. CA's indicated that the guidelines for use of CA's should be clarified and uniformly defined to principals and supervising teachers. Supervisors of CA's indicated that the work of CA's would be improved by more inservice training in writing for CA's, by more clearly defining the duties and responsibilities of CA's, by hiring more CA's to reduce the CA/teacher ratios and by using CA's exclusively for composition related activities.

5. When CA's are present in the schools, students complete more writing assignments during an average week than do students in classes without CA's and more activities including direct writing are emphasized in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made relative to the Composition Aide/Theme Reader Program based on the findings of this report:

1. The Composition Aide/Theme Reader Program should be extended for 1987-88 because it has resulted in increased student opportunity to write and in the number of writing products completed.

2. An effort should be made to hire CA's with training in English beyond the high school level with increased compensation being provided for CA's with bachelor's and higher degrees. A possible solution is to hire retired teachers and/or graduate students with appropriate competencies in English/communication skills.

3. CA's should be used to fulfill the responsibilities for which they were hired based on established guidelines.

4. The English Department should re-issue guidelines for use of CA's that are shared with Assistant Superintendents, the Division of Human Resource Management, principals and English department chairpersons in oral and written communications.

5. The English Department should continue to implement a program of on-going inservice training for CA's.

6. The English Department should be informed by the Regional Superintendent's office each time a CA is hired in the schools and where the CA is placed.

7. CA's should be furnished with a description of their responsibilities upon notice of employment.

8. Criteria for hiring CA's, the length of the work day and the work year for CA's should be clarified by the Division of Human Resource Management and communicated to principals, English department chairpersons and CA's.

9. The work of CA's should be monitored through various means including observation by the English Department and the appropriate regional personnel.

10. Supervisors of CA's should conduct quarterly evaluations with feedback to CA's on their performance. Results of the quarterly evaluations should be forwarded to the English Department.

During the 1986 Winter Planning Retreat, the Board of Education of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) identified writing as the number one instructional priority for the next five years (1987-1992). The Superintendent of DCPS launched a Writing Initiative to identify a plan for implementing the systemwide emphasis on writing. The Writing Initiative has the broader goals of improving student ability to write, providing teachers across subject areas with training in the writing process and updating administrators relative to new trends in writing. One of the strategies employed to provide students with increased opportunities to write and to assist teachers with the resulting paper burden was the hiring of Composition Aides/ Theme Readers (CA's).

The rationale that led to the proposal for hiring CA's was gleaned from the 1986 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report on Writing and from research conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The NAEP report revealed that the poor writing performance of students is directly related to the availability of opportunities for students to practice the craft. NCTE and Holbrook (1984) indicate that opportunity to write is inhibited by the large enrollment of many English classes and the number of papers that have to be evaluated and returned to students when opportunity to write is provided. Holbrook (1984) concludes that creative strategies for incorporating the writing process in classes across the curriculum and for handling the resulting paper burden were challenges for a school system concerned with providing opportunities to write. The Composition Aide Proposal (See Appendix) presented to the superintendent states that "the effective use of Composition Aides/ Theme Readers will contribute significantly to the system's Writing Initiative by providing English teachers with assistance in giving students increased writing practice." Anticipated outcomes from the hiring of CA's were that English teachers would receive assistance in monitoring/assisting student progress during student writing opportunities and could rapidly make comments on and return student compositions (ie., increasing student opportunities to write while providing immediate and personalized feedback).

Composition Aide (CA) positions were advertised via newspapers, job announcements and word of mouth during November 1986. Candidates for CA positions referred to the English Department by Administrative Assistants to the Regional Assistant Superintendents and the Division of Human Resource Management were to be tested (if education level was less than B.A.) and interviewed. Candidates for CA positions also had to complete the appropriate application and have earned a high school diploma (or GED). Successful candidates were placed by regional offices in middle and secondary schools based on the principal's desire to accept a CA. The English Department recommended that CA's be placed at grades 8, 10 and 12 because of the difficulty of the writing requirements at those grade levels. The original intent was that CA's be hired at the EG-04 level (at $13,000 per year). After many of the interviews were completed, the wage and hour criteria were changed so that most CA's worked for six hours a day and earned an annual salary of approximately $7,000/year. Principals had various options for extending either the number of CA's or the quality

of CA's using the allocated $13,000 once a position was approved at his or her school. The first CA was hired during December 1986.

Evaluation Questions

The Superintendent of the District of Columbia Public Schools requested that an evaluation be undertaken to determine the current status of the Composition Aide Program. The following issues were identified and data were collected by Research and Evaluation:

I. When were CA's hired?

II. What is the educational background of CA's?

III. What type of training has been provided for CA's?

IV. How are CA's being used in the schools?

V. What impact have CA's had on the amount of writing that is occuring in the schools?

Methodology

On May 27, 1987, surveys and a cover letter from the superintendent were mailed to all CA's, supervisors of CA's and a sample of English teachers in schools where there were no CA's. Follow-up letters and surveys were mailed on June 10, as a reminder to those who had not responded as of June 8. The overall response rates were 50% for CA's, 59% for supervisors of CA's, and 80% for teachers of writing without CA's. Interviews were conducted and data collected by the project manager from the English Department and a sample of English teachers. The results of the data analysis are presented in the next section using the issues identified above as the umbrella for reporting the findings.

Findings

The results of the data analysis and interviews will be presented using the Evaluation Questions stated above as the frame of reference.

I. WHEN WERE CA'S HIRED?

The number of CA applicants examined by the English Department and the number of placements made by region are noted in Table 1.

Table 1

NUMBER OF COMPOSITION AIDE APPLICATIONS AND PLACEMENTS

	Number of Applicants	Number Passed Exams	*Number Exempted	Number Placed	Locations
Region A	3	2	1	3	Francis J.H. Douglass J.H. Jefferson J.H.
Region B	12	10	2	10	Macfarland J.H. Rabaut J.H. (2) Hardy M.S. West M.S. Coolidge S.H. (2) Roosevelt S.H. Wilson S.H. (2)
Region C	19	19	0	14	Brookland C.S. Ft. Lincoln C.S. Backus J.H. Hamilton J.H. Hart J.H. Langley J.H. Lincoln J.H. Taft J.H. Cardozo S.H. Dunbar S.H. (2) McKinley S.H. (2) Spingarn S.H.
Region D	6	4	2	4	Stuart-Hobson (3) Eastern S.H.
Other	8	8	0	5	Banneker S.H. (2) Ellington School W/O Walls Sharpe Health

* - Applicants with college degrees were eligible for exemption from examination. Most, however, were tested.

CA applicants without a bachelor's degree were required to pass a writing and a spelling test. The essays were evaluated using an analytic scoring procedure with the highest possible score equal to 100 points. The spelling test consisted of sentences containing ten misspelled words with the highest score equal to 100 points. The essay and spelling tests were averaged. An average score of 140 points was set as the passing score.

Table 2 summarizes the month and year that responding CA's were hired.

Table 2

MONTH AND YEAR RESPONDING CA'S WERE HIRED

Date Hired	Number
December, 1986	2
January, 1987	5
February, 1987	1
March, 1987	4
April, 1987	1
Did Not Indicate	3
	16

Of the thirty six CA's hired, one CA with an advanced degree was hired as an English teacher during the Spring. Another CA resigned.

II. WHAT IS THE EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF CA'S?

Table 3 summarizes the educational background of responding CA's.

Table 3

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED

Level of Education	Number	Percent
High School Graduate	2	12.5%
Junior College/2 Yrs.	8	50.0%
Technical College	1	6.3%
Bachelors Degree	2	12.5%
Masters Degree	2	12.5%
Did Not Indicate	1	6.2%
	16	100%

III. WHAT TYPE OF TRAINING HAS BEEN PROVIDED FOR CA'S?

A series of five inservice training activities were provided through the English Department. The five workshops were Diagnostic and Skill Building, Collaboration With Classroom Teachers (included supervising English teachers), Conferencing Skills, Holistic and Analytic Scoring and Individual and Group Evaluation. The first three sessions were held during February. The final session was held on May 12, 1987. Five of the responding CA's (31%) were not on staff at the time that the first three inservice activities were held. Twelve of the respondents (75%) reported attending at least one of the inservice workshops for CA's held at the Instructional Services Center. Two others reported attending training sessions provided by their work site (12.5%). Seven of the respondents expressed concerns about the training they received (44%). Some of the CA's suggested that they be involved in continuing education programs and/or summer courses that emphasize basic language and writing skills.

Supervising teachers of CA's expressed concern with the level of training that CA's received (74%, n=14). They felt that CA's needed more long-term training. Some supervising teachers also indicated that CA's should have earned a bachelor's degree at a minimum and should be paid higher salaries (11%, n=2).

IV. HOW ARE CA'S BEING USED IN THE SCHOOLS?

CA's were asked to list their duties. The most frequent responses included the following: Correcting and grading papers (67%, 10 responses), assisting in the preparation of lessons and projects (53%, n=8), and working with individual students and/or small groups (40%, n=6). Other activities reported by CA's included maintaining student progress reports, proctoring exams and attending conferences (13% for each activity, n=2 for each). One respondent indicated having responsibility for conducting lessons, checking notebooks and disciplining students (6%, n=1).

The final question on the CA survey elicited general comments regarding the use of CA's in DCPS. Although most were enthusiastic about the program, several listed aspects that could be changed. Two respondents (12.5%) stated that the program seemed somewhat vague or undefined. They proposed that the duties of CA's be uniformly defined, thus bringing cohesion to the program. (Guidelines for use of CA's were mailed to principals and English department chairpersons prior to the placement of a CA). Two additional respondents desired more time to work with individuals and/or small groups of students (25%). Finally, CA's indicated a desire for better communication at the school and system levels (25%, n=4).

According to supervising teachers, CA's most frequently corrected and graded papers (n=17, 89%). Fifty-three percent of the supervising teachers reported that CA's worked with individual students (n=10), worked with small groups (37%, n=7) and prepared instructional materials (32%, n=6). Less common duties were monitoring student progress in writing compositions (22%, n=4), leading the class in discussions (11%, n=2),

checking notebooks (5%, n=1) and designing instructional materials (5%, n=1).

When supervising teachers were asked to list the things that their school or DCPS could do to improve the effectiveness of CA's, respondents gave suggestions that fall into four general categories. The majority of teachers were concerned with the level of previous training of their CA's (74%, n=14), while others were concerned with the limited number of available CA's (37%, n=7), and with greater clarification of duties so that CA's would not be assigned non-composition related duties (32%, n=6). Finally, two respondents (11%, n=2) suggested increased compensation for CA's.

A summary of the number of English teachers worked with by respondents is reported in Table 4.

Table 4

REPORTED RATIOS OF COMPOSITION AIDES TO TEACHERS

Number of Teachers Worked With	Frequency	Percent of CA's
1	6	37.5%
2	4	25.0%
3	1	6.3%
4	1	6.3%
5	2	12.5%
Not Applicable	1	6.3%
No Response	1	6.3%
	16	

The average CA-teacher ratio is 1:2

V. WHAT IMPACT HAVE CA'S HAD ON THE AMOUNT OF WRITING THAT IS OCCURING IN THE SCHOOLS ?

Tables 5 and 7 summarize the differences in the number of writing assignments and types of activities identified as writing assigned by Supervisors of CA's in comparison to a sample of English teachers without CA's. Table 6 indicates the amount of time spent by CA's, supervisors of CA's and English teachers without CA's performing activities related to writing instruction.

Table 5

NUMBER OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS COMPLETED
BY STUDENTS DURING AN AVERAGE WEEK

	Average # Of Assignments Completed	
Class Period	English Teachers With CA's	English Teachers Without CA's
1st.	4.3	2.8
2nd.	3.8	2.6
3rd.	4.8	3.2
4th.	3.2	2.5
5th.	3.1	2.8
6th.	2.5	3.3
7th.	4.3	3.5

Table 6

NUMBER OF HOURS SPENT IN VARIOUS ACTIVITIES DURING AN AVERAGE WEEK

	Average Time Spent In Hours Per Week		
Activity	CA's	Supervisors Of CA's	Teachers Without CA's
Reading Student Compositions	6.5	7.2	6.1
Grading Student Compositions	7.6	5.6	4.9
Work With Individual Students	4.1	3.0	2.5
Work With Group (s) Of Students	5.9	3.4	4.6
Preparing Instructional Mat.	3.9	3.4	3.5
Activities Not Related Writing	5.7	8.1	5.4
Sub. Teaching	0.9	0.0	0.0

Table 7

ACTIVITIES IDENTIFIED AS WRITING
THAT TAKES PLACE IN THE CLASSROOM: A RANKING

Activity	Supervisors of CA's	Teachers Without CA's
Book Reports	2	2
Essays	1	1
Fill in Blank	10	9
Journal Writing	4	8
Multiple Choice	8	7
Poetry/Prose	6	5
Research Paper	3	6
Sentence Compl.	5	3
Short Stories	7	4
Other	9	10

Table 8 compares the number of hours that CA's reported spending on activities related or not related to writing in comparison to the number of hours supervising teachers report that CA's spend.

Table 8

NUMBERS OF HOURS SPENT COMPLETING VARIOUS ACTIVITIES DURING AN AVERAGE WEEK

Activities	Average Time CA's Spent In Hours Per Week: Responses Of CA's	Responses of Supervisors of CA's
Reading Student Compositions	6.5	4.3
Grading Student Compositions	7.6	3.6
Work With Individual Students	4.1	3.7
Work With Group (s) of Students	5.9	2.6
Preparing Instructional Mat.	3.9	1.9
Activities Not Related Writing	5.7	3.4
Substitute Teaching	0.9	0.4

DISCUSSION

The Findings indicate that students in classes assisted by CA's are completing more writing products than are students in classes not assisted by CA's (Table 5). CA's are also assisting their supervisors in managing the paper load that results from an emphasis on the writing process. These findings alone provide strong support for the Composition Aide Program despite concerns relative to the late placement of CA's and the training and use of CA's.

The principal concern with training was that many of the inservice opportunities provided by the English Department were offered before all of the CA's were hired. Thus, a segment of the CA pool missed many of the training sessions. Other respondents indicated that they did not receive communications relative to the training sessions resulting in additional absences. In response to the concerns, the English Department recommended the hiring of successful CA candidates but was not immediately informed of actual hirings or placements. Communications relative to CA training were mailed by the English Department to principals and CA's, but incomplete information and follow through at the school level prevented all CA's from being informed relative to inservice training dates and activities (See Appendix).

Supervising teachers expressed concern with the level of preparation of CA's. Due to the salary level of CA's ($13,000), the educational preparation of CA applicants and those eventually placed varied widely. CA's with a minimum of two years of college were considered by supervising English teachers to be adequate CA's after completing a series of inservice offerings provided by the English Department. Teachers stated that CA's with less than a bachelor's degree need long term inservice training. Some supervising teachers indicated that CA's should have, at minimum, a college degree and higher compensation to be more effective in the classroom.

Supervising teachers also expressed concern relative to the use of CA's. Some CA's worked with as many as six English teachers. Many CA's were used as "in house" substitute teachers in non-composition related classes. One CA even served as an assistant to a principal and was never involved in activities related to writing. Supervising teachers indicated that the English Department should orient (re-orient) principals, supervising teachers and other teachers relative to the appropriate use of CA's. Uniform guidelines relative to the use of CA's should be put in writing to serve as a guide for school personnel during the year (and to reduce the use of CA's in non-composition related activities).

Overall, the implementation of the CA program appears to have yielded modest success during the first six months of operation. As with any new program, there is room for improvement. Recommendations for improvement are outlined in the next section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made relative to the Composition Aide/Theme Reader Program based on the findings of this report:

1. The Composition Aide/Theme Reader Program should be extended for 1987-88 because it has resulted in increased student opportunity to write and in the number of writing products completed.

2. An effort should be made to hire CA's with training in English beyond the high school level with increased compensation being provided for CA's with bachelor's and higher degrees. A possible solution is to hire retired teachers and/or graduate students with appropriate competencies in English/communication skills.

3. CA's should be used to fulfill the responsibilities for which they were hired based on established guidelines.

4. The English Department should re-issue guidelines for use of CA's that are shared with Assistant Superintendents, the Division of Human Resource Management, principals and English department chairpersons in oral and written communications.

5. The English Department should continue to implement a program of on-going inservice training for CA's.

6. The English Department should be informed by the Regional Superintendent's office each time a CA is hired in the schools and where the CA is placed.

7. CA's should be furnished with a description of their responsibilities upon notice of employment.

8. Criteria for hiring CA's, the length of the work day and the work year for CA's should be clarified by the Division of Human Resource Management and communicated to principals, English department chairpersons and CA's.

9. The work of CA's should be monitored through various means including observation by the English Department and the appropriate regional personnel.

10. Supervisors of CA's should conduct quarterly evaluations with feedback to CA's on their performance. Results of the quarterly evaluations should be forwarded to the English Department.